



Dothan's "Fabulous Fearsome Foursome," Mike Schmitz, Joe Copeland, Charles Coggins and Bob Theune, hoist their bikes in victory after dipping their tires in the Atlantic Ocean following their four-week, cross-country bicycle journey with 25 other cyclists.

photo by Amanda Arnold

Costa Mesa, Calif.

SURRENDER TO VICTORY

by Amanda Arnold

On Tybee Island near Savannah, Georgia, each of Dothan's "Fabulous Fearless Foursome" had arrived, and they were jubilant. It had been nearly a month – and over 3,000 miles – since they'd dipped their bicycle tires into the Pacific Ocean at the start of their cross-country journey.

(false) tornado warnings, in order to be in the best physical condition possible.

Yet, early Saturday morning, April 22nd, as they gathered with their families and friends at Dothan Regional Airport before departing to California for the Monday start of their long-awaited trek, some apprehension was unmistakable. Amidst the overwhelming optimism and good wishes, came silent questions: Had they done enough? Would they be up to the mountains and the desert? And again, whose idea was this?! With so many in the Wiregrass pulling for them, with local TV and radio stations planning periodic updates along the way, and donations for each completed mile being pledged to benefit the Wiregrass Children's Home, failure was not an option. But success was not a certainty.



By May 20th, four Saturdays later, these Type A's had done what it took to realize their dream. They had attained their goal – and so much more. As each of the 25 riders made their brief after-dinner remarks at Savannah's Inn on Ellis Square, many noted that the journey's greatest surprise was the kinship and congeniality they found among the many "boss-types" and friendships

forged they felt sure would continue.

With deep admiration and enormous respect for each of their fellow riders, hard-won during a month's rigors on the road, their hearts were full. Again and again, the riders spoke with gratitude, awe, humor, pride, and humility of their ordeal, as well as of those with whom they had shared it.

"We had a few bad times," said one, "but we enjoyed those, too." As they told their stories, it became clear that each had to surmount challenges they had not expected.

They confronted personal obstacles they could not have prepared for – with a depth of inner resources they did not know they had – until those resources were needed.

Even more than the gorgeous scenery they were able to appreciate at times along the way, was the beauty they found in each other and in themselves, as each rider, pitted against a personal "wall," overcame that barrier by facing an edge, pushing beyond it – or surrendering into it – whatever it took to continue and complete the journey.

Among the Dothan Foursome, it was Mike Schmitz whose challenge came first. Sunday in Costa Mesa, while cycling back to the hotel from a bike shop, he hit a groove in the pavement, fell a certain way to avoid heavy road traffic, and sprained both thumbs and wrists. His lower arms got so swollen, he wasn't able to close his luggage without help for a week, and worse, could not grip his bike's handlebars. But he found a way, by guiding his bike with upper forearms and elbows. "I couldn't quit before we got started," he recalls. "I'd made a commitment to Joe. And to raise \$100K for the children's home. I know how important that is. A lot of people had committed funds and that's what kept me going. Even through that day in Oklahoma when it was 48 degrees, raining, with 20 mile-per-hour headwinds, knowing we had a hundred miles against the wind ahead of us, that kept me going."

Joe Copeland struggled with the frustration of having to change the most flat tires on the trip (10), and with painful foot problems. He'd never had Achilles tendonitis before, but as the



Costa Mesa, Calif.

"I've never quit anything. I told my kids when I left that if I came home before it was over, it would be in a box."

– Joe Copeland

Charles stops for a minute to rest near an ominous sign.



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"Feels great to be here," said 55-year-old Joe Copeland. "Savannah is my new favorite city in the world!" (It was Joe who had encouraged the other Dothan riders to commit to this journey almost a year ago.)

"I'm extremely grateful to be finished," said Bob Theune, age 45. "Been a long, long road. 'I'm tired and ready to go back home to Dothan.'" (Bob had found his greatest challenge also changed his life.)

"Going over the mountains was the toughest part," said 53-year-old Mike Schmitz. "And with the wind against us for about eleven hundred miles, that was tough. But this is exciting. I am so proud and excited right now to be here! I am!" (Due to a bike fall injury, Mike was nearly sidelined in California before the trip began.)

"Made it to the finish line and I'm happy," said Charles Coggins. "The water feels wonderful." (At 65, Charles was the oldest cyclist, and hit his "wall" the first day out, struggling to make it up 8 miles of a winding road to the top of a 2,400 foot mountain. With his teammates anxiously awaiting his arrival at the summit, each remembered Charles' early reluctance and how they had urged him to join them for this "trip of a lifetime.")

Charles marks an impressive milestone on the road in New Mexico.



Contributed Photo

NEW MEXICO STATE LINE

Celebrating the triumph of completing Fast America South 2006, many of the 25 cyclists from around the nation and the world – who had endured this cross-continent ordeal together – wanted to have their pictures taken with "Team Alabama." Said one rider from Massachusetts, "They were amazing and they made this ride so much fun. We'll never forget them."

One of the five female cyclists, Dr. Susan Dean, from Charlotte, North Carolina, stopped by the "Team Alabama" table during that evening's banquet to be sure that wives and friends there knew, "These guys are men among men. Giants. They rode with class, with power, and they still maintained grace and humor on the road. It was an honor to ride with them every day."



Bicyclists have many things in common, among them, the question they are most often asked: Why? Why surrender the comfort of your home for a month, leaving your family and business behind, in order to grind out between 100-150 miles on a bicycle for 7 to 9 hours a day, through difficult terrain and unpredictable weather? So you can sleep in a different motel every night, with just two days of rest? Who would do that? What is the appeal?



Mike finds welcome rest against a wall.

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In the lobby of the Savannah hotel before the evening's commemorative banquet, Bob Theune explained it this way. "As different as we are, cyclists are always looking for a new challenge. We're all Type A personalities who tend to be aggressive about a task. We're relentless, go-go-go all the time. We bowl people over sometimes, we're so energetic and goal-oriented. But I learned on this trip: there are Type 4A's, Type 3A's, Type 2A's, and Type 1A's."

He spoke of Jonathan, for example, a Ph.D. in molecular biology who is a practicing bio-medical patent attorney. "Not much ruffles him. He's quiet, real unassuming," and the only one, by the way, to have made this trip previously. ("I've got a short-term memory," joked Jonathan when asked why he was

Tybee Island, Ga.

doing this again after only two years.) "Then there's Scott," Bob continued. "He's a judge. Hyper and twitching all the time. Those are the two extremes, but we're all achievers who tend to go beyond what is average."

The journey of our hometown heroes had begun actually long before its official start in Costa Mesa, California, on April 24th. Knowing that preparation for this "first-rung of fitness adventures" would be essential, the Dothan Foursome trained several times weekly for nearly 8 months, including a dozen or so 100-mile "century rides." That meant riding solo and together as often as they could, through rain, sleet, cold, heat, even

America by Bicycle tour leader reminded him, "You've never ridden a bicycle 800 miles in 6 days before either." He advised Joe to ride in the back-up van for the last of that day's 30 miles. With help from a chiropractor on tour and the good fortune of the next day being one of the trip's two rest days, Joe managed to deal with periodic flare-ups from then on. "I was going to keep going one way or another," he recalls. "Number one, I've never quit anything. I told my kids when I left that if I came home before it was over, it would be in a box. Number two, we had a goal, a lot of money to raise, and we had to finish this thing up."

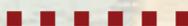
For Charles Coggins, the first day was his worst. "It wasn't pretty," he recalls, as he was the last of the 25 to make it to the top of a brutally-steep, winding-mountain road. He figures now that he must have been low on potassium, but the subsequent 20-mile descent with no pedaling was so euphoric, he found new momentum and got stronger every day. In fact, with three days until the finish line, he decided to push as hard as he could, and finished 4th, among "the hammerheads," as the most aggressive lead riders are called.

Not just because he was this trip's most senior cyclist, but also because "he was the most improved, the most courageous, and the most inspirational to the rest of the riders," he was the

recipient that Saturday night in Savannah of the tour staff's Map Award, the U.S. map used daily to chart the journey as it progressed. "Those little lines drawn between 26 towns look small," the presenter said, "but each of you knows they're huge."

Even more huge to Bob Theune, the youngest of the Dothan Foursome, was, as golf great Bobby Jones used to say, his "6 inches between the ears." Said Bob, "There are some long, difficult days out there and it's hard to keep

going mentally sometimes." Especially when matters back home had him conflicted about being away. He knew, as Charles said, that "we had this appointment every day we could not break," so he decided to stay focused without being competitive. "The life-changing experience for me," he said at the Saturday night banquet table, "is that I learned exactly what a Type A is, and I learned that I could turn that switch off. I'd never been able to do that before, so I learned something new on this trip that is great."



Charles learned that initial doubts can be wrong. When Joe first mentioned the cross-country bike challenge, even though Charles had already logged over 60,000 miles during 20 years of cycling, Charles' response to Joe was, "It's not possible. I can't do that."

Mike, "the Ironman," as he's known among friends for his other athletic pursuits, admits, "I didn't believe I could do this. I have pretty strong self-esteem and that humbled me. But to accomplish a 3-thousand mile trek is just a great feat and helped to expand my horizons."

Joe Copeland's horizons expanded politically. Hours a day on a bicycle can often include deep

conversations among riders about controversial subjects. He laughs when he says, "Only on a cross-country bike trip would a conservative Republican from the South learn he could like a liberal Democrat from Chicago – and vice versa!"

Could Joe have stumbled onto something? Maybe Congress' next recess – along with other



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The four riders from Dothan are shown here at a stopover at The University of Alabama. Among other nicknames for Mike, Joe, Charles and Bob are "Team Alabama" and "C-4," as all four of the men have served as chairman of the Dothan Chamber of Commerce.

Washington politicians' – should include a long bike ride somewhere.

For as Mike put it, "Everybody helped each other. We all wanted the others to succeed."

Thank you, "Team Alabama." To paraphrase the late, great Joseph Campbell, you are more than "celebrities – who serve themselves." You are "heroes, who go out there, ready or not – and redeem society." As one cyclist said in Savannah, "Life is too short. I learned that what I thought was important is not so important. I'm now more patient with myself – and with others."

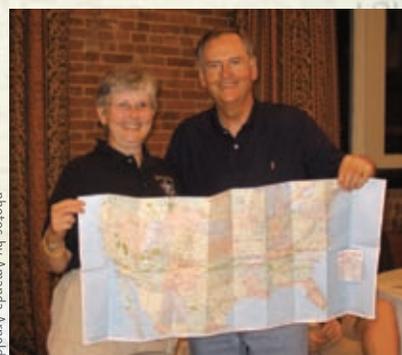
A month and 3,000 miles? A meager price, in retrospect, for such invaluable rewards. **D**

Tybee Island, Ga.



(Far Left) Charles is honored by his fellow riders with the Map Award, receiving the actual map used by the group during the journey.

Mike, Bob, Joe and Charles: Temporarily sunburned, forever changed.



photos by Amanda Arnold

